

The Life of a Bomber Co-pilot

by David M. Mazurowski

For many young Americans, including my father, combat service in World War II was the defining moment in their lives. Forty years after the war, it was still difficult for my Dad to discuss the fourteen-hour missions he flew off Saipan as a twenty-year-old lieutenant and navigator in B-29s. I remember how moved he was the day his old bomb wing dedicated their plaque at the Air Force Academy's cemetery, yet even then he wouldn't talk of his daily life on the island or the grueling six-hour flights home from a bomb run over Tokyo, when the crew hoped their prayers would keep engines and flight controls and wings together long enough to find that one runway in the middle of the Pacific.

General Jack Catton was my father's first squadron commander. After attending Catton's funeral, also at the Air Force Academy cemetery, my father seemed withdrawn, as if the memories of flying in a bomb squadron that lost nearly eighty percent of its crews still weighed heavily on his mind.

I can't begin to explain how proud my father was of my brothers and me—all three of us graduates from the Air Force Academy who went on to earn pilot's wings. Yet, despite what we shared professionally, I've never known much of my Dad's life in his war. Thus I picked up Robert Floyd Cooper's biography of Bert Stiles, *Serenade to the Blue Lady*, with more than a casual interest, hoping this account of the life of a bright, promising author turned bomber co-pilot would provide insight into what the young men of my father's World War II generation thought, experienced, and suffered.

Cooper's biography does not disappoint those interested in the personal aspect of modern warfare. He writes about Stiles in a vivid, immediate, "you-are-there" sort of fashion, from the time Bert was a kid growing up in Denver to the final horrifying moments of his last sortie over Germany. The solid research

behind Cooper's work adds to its attraction; the author mined every possible source of information about Stiles, including recollections from his family, friends, and flying buddies; and he's combined these with Bert's own letters, journals, and published writing. In fact, perhaps the best part of Cooper's biography is the integration of all this disparate material into a unified, accessible whole.

Cooper uses dialogue, excerpts from letters, and wonderful anecdotes to bring Bert Stiles to life in this tribute to a fallen comrade. All the dialogue, coming in dramatic spurts, and written in a believable slang of the 1940s, lends credibility to Cooper's effort. As he tells us in his foreword, though he admits he puts words into his characters' mouths, in almost every instance he's based the dialogues on actual passages from Stiles' journals or on verifiable stories from friends and family. Here's one example, when Stiles, a brand-new pilot, meets up with his college buddy Sam Newton in Salt Lake City:

Newton told him of his six-month run through Rankin Field ("I flew Stearmans there—great little plane to learn on") to Merced, California, for Basic and Fort Sumner, New Mexico, for Advanced. "I flew the 'Bamboo Bomber' in New Mex," he said, "and I guess I was already slated by that time for bombers."

"So what do you think you're headed for, Bert?"

So Bert told his college friend of his experience chewing the tail of another AT-6 in Advanced Training.

"I ended up near the bottom of the barrel, I think. Looks like co-pilot for me on a four-engine bomber."

"I'll be on the big ones, too."

"Sure, Sam—but as first pilot."

"Yeah."

"Co-pilot, damn it! I wanted fighters so badly I'd of given my left nut—freely—for a P-51 or P-38."

Cooper effectively uses dialogue in all the right places: when Bert is a lovelorn college student, when he almost washes out of pilot

school, and when their B-17 squadron is bushwhacked by ME-109s while enroute on a mission to Berlin.

The extensive and careful research Cooper completed before writing his book provides a firm underpinning for the dialogue and heightens the immediacy of the work. For example, Cooper includes thirty-five photographs in the biography, and they're not just "cheesecake" hero shots of Bert Stiles standing in front of his airplane. We find photos of Bert's home in Denver, his family, his college, several of his girlfriends, and many of the enlisted crew members he flew with. Even better, Cooper intersperses Stiles' own letters and journal entries into almost every major event and incident related in the book. For instance, here's what Bert wrote to his parents when he decided to drop out of Colorado College:

This letter will tell you with any doubt, my folks, what I think. I've written a lot of letters like this but somehow you never seem to think that the "me" who writes them is the same "me" who can't talk to you—when you are there looking so sad. On a typewriter, I can be ruthless and I can't see your frozen faces.

I'm through with college for a while. Many times this semester I've figured the fake and sham I'm making of college wasn't worth the cost. I don't care for what they make you work at in college; it just doesn't seem important. Colorado College is a playhouse.

And Bert's letters home from England, without a doubt, give us crystalline snapshots of the mind of a young man at war:

We've crossed the channel into the heartland six times now. The raids go by so fast they're all mixed up in my mind. We've got an airplane of our own now. . . . We're getting the name painted on her and a picture of a dame with no clothes on. There's a sergeant here specializes in bosoms. He must have lovely dreams.

I'm so tired of sitting in the co-pilot's seat, I think I'm getting cancer of the buttocks. The cheek bone on the

left side throbs at high altitude and at times it rings like a gong. Every trip seems to have a call for a three o'clock briefing. Two in the morning is a good hour to come home but a very wretched hour to crawl out of the sack.

Such excerpts reveal much about the true character of Bert Stiles; he's proud that his crew is getting their own plane; he is a trifle fixated on a certain aspect of female anatomy; he accurately describes the weariness and fatigue he suffers from while flying, yet his subtle wit shines through in the last sentence, as he ponders the differences between peacefully ending your day at 2 a.m. . . . or just having it begin.

Cooper hits his stride in the second half of the book, beginning with the chapter on Bert's experiences in pilot school and continuing on into the extensive section of Stiles' daily life while he was flying out of Bassingbourn. Since Cooper also flew in Eighth Air Force as a B-17 co-pilot, here his sense of detail and his accuracy in reporting are practically flawless. And while his reports of the actual missions take us into the air with Bert and his crew, I found the passages covering the more mundane aspects of the flier's life even more informative. A haunting quality arises in these brief moments; we see Stiles at dawn lounging against the tail wheel before the bombers launch, singing to himself all the sad ballads he knows. Or find him wandering around war-torn London streets, achingly lonely in the midst of thousands of workers and hawkers and trollopes and troops milling about Piccadilly Circus. Or sit with him outside the flight operations shack until ten o'clock at night, continually glancing up into the sky, waiting for his overdue squadron to come back from a particularly dangerous mission. Here Cooper, more than any war writer I've read, captures the quiet moments, the misery, the confusion, and the weariness that nearly overwhelms these displaced young men.

Although Cooper has given us an accessible text that's certainly worth reading, a few minor flaws do detract from the overall presentation. For example, he begins each chapter with a quote from one of Bert's letters, followed immediately by an

italicized passage from Stiles' only novel. While some of these passages are illuminating, others jar severely and seem labored. The chapter on Bert's childhood in Denver, for instance, begins with a cutting about the nightmare of facing flak and wearing oxygen masks "full of drool," a passage that bears no discernible relationship to winter days spent on ski slopes and summer days fishing for trout in Colorado mountain streams. Cooper also tends to write excessively in short paragraphs, many of them consisting of just two or three declarative sentences, a staccato style that's more than a little distracting.

While these stylistic matters irritate only slightly, those suspicious of "fictionalized" biography will find a few passages annoying, especially when Cooper writes of what Stiles is thinking at a particular moment. The very end of the book highlights some of these problems, as we relive Bert's final seconds over Germany:

My enemy is dead, Bert thought, with a strange mixture of triumph and unutterable sadness, long live my enemy.

Instinctively and abruptly, he hauled back on the stick. But with instantly dawning horror, he realized he had allowed himself to get dangerously close to the ground. God, the ground was right on top of him! God . . .

He only had a moment left, and he knew it, and he accepted it. His thoughts raced: Oh, God, is this how life ends? Is this *it*? But now—I'll meet *You* and love *You* . . .

And Blue Lady: this is the way it was meant to be, isn't it? You *knew* I would die in the skies I loved so much . . . So now I'll meet *you* and join *you* and love *you* and fly away with you into the blue . . . forever . . .

Thankfully, Cooper doesn't lose control like this very often.

I don't want to give the wrong impression: Cooper's work has produced a book worth reading. I've spent much of my career in operational flying squadrons, almost five of those years flying from bases in England, and I think Cooper faithfully captures what life was like for Bert Stiles and his friends. Yet Cooper's most

valuable contribution may not be this biography; instead, he has revitalized interest in Bert Stiles as an author, whose autobiographical novel, *Serenade to the Big Bird*, was written in just a few short weeks in the heat and emotion of World War II.

Although Cooper's work is admirable and accurate, I found Stiles' own writing more compelling, filled with graphic detail and penned with a lyrical quality. In Bert Stiles' book, we don't just read about going to war, we hear, feel, smell, and taste it. He sustains this exquisite level of detail throughout the book; it infuses every descriptive passage; it heightens every conceivable moment. One of my favorite chapters focuses on the room at Bassingbourn he shared with Sam Newton, the Colorado College friend who became the first pilot in charge of Bert's crew. Stiles lovingly describes their living quarters, beginning with his own beat-up Corona typewriter on a shabby desk, then listing the contents of their lockers and drawers, and finally lingering over an account of the sea of pinups gazing down at them from the walls and shelves. Here's Bert's catalogue of what lives on a flat piece of wood thrown across the top of his own locker:

There was a book by Freud and an atlas. There was a book of poems by Rilke, a book on yoga by a yogi, a Russian grammar by an Englishman, and a baseball cap from the Brooklyn Dodgers, which was blue There were five packages of gum which came with the room, and some sock stretchers which I brought with me, and three books by John Marquand, one bought and two borrowed. There were some lousy lemon drops and a big spoon. The ball cap was the most valuable thing in the room.

And when Bert admits he's the ninth man in three months to occupy the bunk on his side of the room, the poignancy of this fact makes us pause—what's the use in cataloging a life that seems so utterly fragile?

Some of Stiles' best writing recounts the horrors he's seen and lived through. While he can describe flak as an almost innocent,

poetic sight, two pages later he'll highlight its more deadly qualities:

One ship took three bursts almost inside the bomb bays. There were at least 250 holes in the waist and radio room when the pilot crash-landed at an RAF base. One of the waist-gunners had a stitching of wounds just above his flak suit across his throat. When they lifted him out they could see his lungs.

"He was so slippery with blood, they dropped him once," one guy told us.

He died in the night. The radioman got a chunk in his left eye that tore away most of the eyeball. The other waist-gunner lost his hand later. It was shredded.

With this sort of tight, newspaper reporter's prose, Stiles demands that we see and feel what he and his comrades had to face, day in and day out.

Bert Stiles' book is filled with snapshots of both the tragedies and the beauty he sees around him. His mind seems to be always attentive, always curious, with a photographic quality. He relates the first time he saw a Fortress blown out of the sky:

The flak tightened up on the group just ahead of ours, and right out at ten o'clock, not very far away, a great red wound opened up, and then the drifting pieces, and ten men and a couple of hundred thousand dollars' worth of airplane, powdered in a hundredth of a second.

And while we were watching the streamers of flame from that one, another Fort nosed over straight down and started for the ground. . . . It must have dived five thousand feet, and then by some miracle it pulled out, level and into a straight-up climb. It stalled out somewhere below us, and fell off on the right wing and spun in.

Yet less than ten pages later, Bert watches the lethal, shiny B-17s taxiing by in the afternoon sun, and he imagines a day when all the combatants could meet peacefully after the war:

Then maybe they can sit down somewhere, where it's quiet, and take a good long look at the whole world.

There it is, they might say, a beat-up, lousy, starving world, filled with hate and manure and revenge, but for all that, look at the moonlight on the willow trees, and listen to the surf on the yellow sand, and the whisper of the wind through the aspen leaves. There is still a little hope there, and a little love and compassion. There are a few little kids without rickets and sunken eyes, and there are hollows deep in the timber where the rabbits get along anyway.

Stiles is at his best reporting these quiet, poetic moments. Whether he's flying at low altitude over the English countryside, admiring the hedgerows and tidy thatched-roof villages, or when he sits under a graceful oak with a buddy eating fresh strawberries on a warm afternoon, Bert seems to find his true self. I've spent hundreds of hours flying high-speed, low-level missions in F-4 Phantoms over the very terrain Stiles describes—believe me, every descriptive passage in his book rings true. A rare individual, thoughtful and aware, somewhat idealistic, a lousy formation pilot, Stiles survives days of terrifying bomber missions into the heartland of Germany, yet he also appreciates a quiet hour bicycling aimlessly down a deserted country lane.

Perhaps the section that best reveals the intensity of character of this young pilot is the short essay entitled "Lonely One," which he places near the end of his book. Stiles was removed from his crew when he still had about twelve missions left on his tour in England. He watches while his friend Sam, the bombardier, the navigator, and all the gunners celebrate after their thirty-fifth mission. That same week he finds himself wandering all over London while waiting to be assigned to a new crew, moving from street to street, ranging through pubs and restaurants, and finally

mingling with the Londoners who are crowded in the underground to escape the buzz bomb attacks. Here he meets a quiet, blue-eyed girl, whom he waltzes around on a piggyback ride through the tunnels, up the escalators, and around the station, the little girl laughing quietly all the while. After he returns the girl to her mother, he marvels at the prettiness of the girl's eyes, and finds some sense of peace:

Her eyes showed that deep blue for a moment and then she closed them.

I stood over her then and my mind moved back a couple of years. Somewhere back there, somewhere, a long time ago, there were beds and sheets and blankets, and moonlight and a fresh wind coming through the window into my room. And somewhere over there, across an ocean, a thousand years ago, there had been laughter and peace and love at times. . . .

Peace was just a word here, just a wish to the new moon, just a prayer to every dawn. But for a little while there had been laughter, quiet laughter from a little girl who didn't want to wake anybody, while the trains screamed through the tunnels, deep below the war outside. . . .

It wasn't until I was almost back at the Red Cross Club that I realized that the loneliness had gone.

Right in the middle of London, buried in the bowels of the subway system, Bert Stiles manages to find humanity, and hope, and a small reason to live.

There are a few instances when this talented young author doesn't hit the mark. Seven times in his book, sandwiched between the wonderful chapters that describe combat flying and his day-to-day life, Stiles puts in short interludes, all of them entitled "A Doll Named August." These segments consist of letters and poems from a young woman he'd met while learning to fly the Fortress in Alabama. And although it's obvious that this particular relationship was on his mind when he sat down to

write his story, the bad poetry, poor lyrics, and gushy writing from the “girl back home” actually detract from his effort.

Aside from these distracting passages about “August,” the only other time Stiles has trouble comes when he discusses his personal philosophy or views on world politics. These passages remind us that we’re reading the work of a 23-year-old, someone who had dropped out of college after just three semesters. Bert Stiles envisions a world of peace, harmony, and justice: a sort of World Confederation of Love. Unfortunately, in these sections he either awkwardly states the obvious:

There are all kinds of people: senators and whores and barristers and bankers and dishwashers. There are Chinamen and Cockneys and Gypsies and Negroes. There are Lesbians and cornhuskers and longshoremen. There are poets and lieutenants and shortstops and prime ministers.

Or he proposes simplistic, overly idealistic answers to the hatred and terror that reign in his world:

Maybe all education has to be built around two words . . . Truth . . . and Justice . . . and maybe if it was, after a long slow time some sort of a halfway decent world could be worked out.

This sort of philosophical musing rarely occurs, though, and it certainly doesn’t ruin the intense, haunting prose that sets this work apart from so much of the other war literature that’s been published this century.

In the preface to Cooper’s biography, Sumner Morris argues that Stiles was “a young man who seemed destined to join the ranks of Steinbeck and Hemingway.” Bert Stiles undeniably found success early—he had an agent by the time he was twenty, and eight of his stories appeared in the prestigious pages of *The Saturday Evening Post* between 1941 and 1945. Sadly, this up-and-coming writer didn’t survive World War II. Stiles completed his thirty-five missions in the B-17, then volunteered

to fly a second combat tour in his first love, the P-51. In November of 1944, two months after he started flying the Mustang, Bert Stiles died during a dogfight with a pack of Focke-Wulf fighters in the skies over Germany.

While my father did survive his combat tour, unfortunately I never had the chance to give him a copy of *Serenade to the Blue Lady*, and I didn't have time to talk to him about Bert Stiles. My Dad was in and out of hospital beginning last January; he suffered a stroke and died in May. He's buried within sight of his Bomb Wing's memorial and his first squadron commander at the Air Force Academy cemetery. We were never close; we never found a way to talk about our hopes, fears, or dreams—the things that matter the most. Yet I wish he had read Bert Stiles' book, because I think it may have opened a door that always remained locked in our relationship. In any event, Robert Floyd Cooper allowed me to discover an author whose intense, white-hot novel is well worthy of attention. Stiles may never have become another Hemingway, but he certainly stands proudly in the ranks of young men—Stephen Crane, Wilfred Owen, and James Jones—who captured the essence of war and honored those, like my father, who fought in them. □

Editor's Note

Serenade to the Blue Lady: The Story of Bert Stiles, by Robert Floyd Cooper is available from Cypress House Publishers, Fort Bragg CA 95437. Pp. 245. \$12.95.

Bert Stiles' novel, *Serenade to the Big Bird* was first published by W.W. Norton in 1952. It was reissued by Bantam Books in 1984.